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The Government Clerk.

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A CHRISTMAS STORY.

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THE GOVERNMENT CLERK.

It was Christmas day. The church-bells rang forth upon the balmy air, full and sonorous. Every side-street and every house showed life, while "the Avenue" was all astir with youth and beauty.

All the other clerks of our Department had gone to visit their friends or to make short excursions into the country. I had heard them laying their plans of pleasure the day before; so I would be alone. I was a "new broom" at the Department, and "new brooms," it is said, "always sweep clean." As I had a number of difficult cases then, or "Kei-ies," as they are technically called, to work up, I had chosen to come and run through with them rather than to accept the many invitations to pleasant walks or visits with my brother clerks.

The bright sunshine, it is true, almost put to flight these industrious resolves, and I felt as I pushed the gay crowd of pleasure seekers aside, on my way down, very much as a man bent upon suicide would feel at a Venetian carnival, where he had to push the joyous throng aside to allow him to get to the dark waters beyond. I felt very much like turning traitor to my virtuous resolves, but I persevered fortunately, and in due time arrived at the scene of my intended labors.

I cannot say, however, that I set to work with any feeling of satisfaction. The rooms were close. The church-bells, which had rung so merrily on my walk down, now sounded solemn and faint, like funeral bells, or had ceased altogether. The sun too, had suddenly hazed over, and although the air was unusually warm for the season, it weighed upon one like a night-mare, contracting the lungs rather than swelling them, with a demon clutch at the throat.

Our offices, consisting of two communicating rooms, were filled with that indescribable atmosphere which seems characteristic of such places. A blue, smoky gloom, free from Heaven's sunshine, and in comparison with the outer air, like a guilty creature unconscious of

his God. The long rows of formal desks—even the odd scraps of paper lying around, scribbled over and over with figures added, figures divided, figures, figures everywhere, but aided the gloom.

One little scrap of paper which I picked up, had evidently been part of a letter commenced but never finished by some clerk as fresh as myself; but it, too, had perished in the effort to live, as though nothing from that dead place could hold communication with the outer world.

I sat down with a sigh. My mind's eye gave me visions enough of green fields and happy brother clerks—alive for *one* day—but before me was a huge pile of “Kei-ies,” kindly left by my predecessor, so I had to set myself to the task of reducing them. Some books were necessary, however, from the inner room; and what was my surprise on entering it to find that I was not alone. An old man, dressed in an old and faded suit of black, sat at one of the desks. So engaged was he making entries in the huge books before him, that he did not seem to notice my entrance, but, on the contrary, never stopped his writing for a moment, either to look at me or to ask how I got there.

Being a new clerk, I was not acquainted with any of my colleagues but those in my own room, so that it was not for *me* to question the right of my fellow-workman to the office, though I *did* wonder how he had gained admittance when I possessed, as I had understood, the sole key to the offices. This might be explained readily, however, by his having a key of his own for private use; and as to his appearance there on a holiday, that was no more surprising than my own presence. He, too, might have “Kei-ies” to work up.

One circumstance had, to be sure, struck me as rather odd; the old gentleman in the faded suit wrote with a quill, yet there was no scratching sound such as is usually produced by writing with such a pen. The offices were as quiet now as the grave. The church-bells had entirely ceased, and not a breath disturbed the vault-like atmosphere of the room. I listened, but could hear no sound, and imagining that my fellow-clerk had fallen asleep, peeped through the half-closed door, but he was still writing away at a terrible rate. This was inexplicable, for I listened attentively for some sound—so attentively that I could hear the beatings of my own heart—yet no other came.

With a “pshaw!” I dismissed the whole subject and set resolutely to work again, yet somehow my mind would wander away to that mysterious old man in his faded suit of black, writing away there so noiselessly, in the gloomy air of the back office. It worked so upon me that at last I determined to make an excuse of getting some books

near his desk, to watch his movements more closely. I did so ; still he did not notice me for a moment, but wrote away as though in haste to complete some task. I drew still closer. What was my wonder at finding, although he wrote apparently with extreme rapidity, that the page was as virgin as when it had come from the paper mill.

Noiselessly the pen flew over the paper, rising and falling with the form of the letters, but not a character followed. The page was blank.

Amused at what I could not but deem the old man's eccentricity, I said, laughingly,

"That is but a slow way to get through with one's work."

For a moment the old gentleman turned his face towards me, then fell to work again without a word.

I noticed then, what I had failed to observe before. The book in which he pretended to write was as sear and yellow as a maple leaf in autumn. His face, too, struck me strangely : without color, with a care-worn, oh, such a worn expression ! Sad, so sad, that involuntarily I drew back.

I began to feel a strange sensation of awe creep over me, but another feeling was soon to supplant it.

A low tap at the outer door had pleaded, as it were, rather than demanded admission. I opened it. A young girl thinly clad, too thinly clad for the season, in spite of the balmy air, stood outside. In her hand, half concealed beneath her faded shawl, she carried a small tin can, such as is used by workmen to contain their lunch. Without noticing me, otherwise than to raise her great hollow eyes to my face for a brief instant, she glided past and entered the inner office. Glided past like a shadow, with no footfall, with no rustle of her garments.

Watching her, I could see her approach the old man at the desk. When he saw her he put down his pen, and taking her two hands in his own, gazed sadly upon her. The girl at this hung her head, while tears streamed noiselessly down the withered cheeks of the old man.

Feeling that there was something dishonorable in thus secretly observing the sorrows of others, I withdrew to my desk again and took up my pen, but could not write. The little pantomime which I had witnessed had explained itself so clearly, that my heart bubbled over with sympathy. Long I waited to hear a word, but not one was spoken. At last curiosity became all-powerful. I peeped through the half closed door once more. The old man was not at his desk ; the young girl had left it too. I entered the room—*it was empty.*

* * * * *

Had what I had seen been a vision ? But I had no time to ask

questions. I had finished my task, dinner time was near, and I felt that to remain one moment longer in such a gloomy spot would be sacrilege to nature and her joyous invitation, for the sun had again burst forth in unusual warmth and life. I thought no more of the vision then, until the next morning, when re-assembled with my fellow-clerks it again occurred to me. Hastily I glanced over the faces in the inner room, the old man's was not among them. I related the circumstance of the day before to my fellows, and after the "major" (the noisiest, but best hearted, and hardest worker in the room), had got "off a line," he just being in that delicate situation when I commenced my story—they condescended to listen to me.

Whilst I had been relating it, the chief clerk of our room looked intently at me. When I had finished, he said seriously—"That is very strange!"

"Last night," he continued, "I was called to visit the deathbed of one of our former clerks. He was an old man such as you have described. I found him with some half dozen of his motherless children about him. He was dying of absolute worriment of mind. Dying from that terrible effort to make both ends meet, which those who know what the effort costs in these times of fearful prices—can alone understand.

"No one worked better than he. Had he had the moral courage to leave the Department and strike out for himself, he could beyond question have made a respectable living and supported and educated his children. But the rust of habit was upon him—he had grown old in the employ of the Government—the springs of action were forever broken. Disappointment and the high prices consequent upon this fearful rebellion finished him. A little girl, one of his youngest, had come to call me by his side—and following her I passed down the long avenue to the miserable locality which was her home. It was Christmas eve; people thronged the side walks bearing happy bundles for their little ones. I could not but contrast the miserable, shivering child beside me with the children of those men. Gay carriages swept past, splashing us with mud from their wheels—in them sat Congressmen and Senators who would vote to-morrow against this child; cast their mighty influence against this wretched, shivering infant. 'Economy'—'Economy.' What difference if they do not *live* up to their maxim, so they cry it still?

"Thank God, they are not all so!

"At last we arrived at the abode of the dying man. Up two flights of stairs into a room lighted by a single candle, whose flame faintly

and sickly invaded the gloom—as though the golden rays themselves had undergone a base chemical change, which had tarnished them—lay the sick man.

“His children were squalidly strewn about—for the room was their only one.

“I saw at a glance that the object of my visit was not long for this world, yet as I approached the humble bed-side the sick man recognized me.

“‘Thanks! Many thanks!’ he said, feebly. ‘I knew that you would come. You were always kind to me at the Department. I was desirous that you should see me before I died. You see *how* I die,’ he continued, ‘Look around you—there are not many comforts here?’

“‘Were you not able to save something, however small, from your salary,’ I asked.

“He pointed to the children who clustered wonderingly about me, unaccustomed as they doubtlessly were, to the vision of a strange and friendly face.

“It was answer enough. Indeed, knowing all about it, I could not have asked the question for *information*; for what could a first class Government clerk *save*, even under the most favorable circumstances? He read my meaning, and sighing deeply he remarked as though in answer—‘No—a clerk in one of the Departments cannot save much. When, therefore, I became sick, I had to go down at once. Oh, it was hard to lie here, consuming the trifle that remained from my last month’s salary in medicines, when my poor little ones were wanting so many things. It was hard, but the worst was yet to come. My daughter—my eldest—the one who was so much like her mother, left me. You have seen her—you know that she possessed the curse of beauty. More I dare not tell you. Privation, want, disgust at the misery at home; temptation on every side; with no mother to guide her; with me, her natural protector, prostrated upon my last bed of sickness. Great God! I *cannot* tell you what became of her.

“‘I know *this*’—he continued energetically, for so great had been his excitement in this narration that he had half arisen in his bed, and now leaned tremblingly upon his poor wasted arm which seemed unable to bear him. ‘I know that she came home one night with more money than we had earned honestly in a month. She brought it to me. It is there, not one cent of it has been touched. Cursing her, I drove her from me—that was the last.

“‘I felt then a cord snap within my breast that told me all was over. From that moment I was dying. You come now to receive my last

breath. 'I will not keep you long,' he continued in a still more feeble tone. 'I will not keep you long,' he reiterated. 'One thought alone now grieves me—what, oh what is to become of my little ones?'

"The thought was evidently too much for him, for sinking back, the hot tears streamed noiselessly down his aged cheeks. In vain I sought to furnish some soothing word; they stuck fast in my throat. I dare not hold out false hopes to a dying man. In almost any other position in life, he would have been able to have kept something. His talents would have commanded a salary sufficiently high, or the city in which he lived would have been a cheaper home, thus enabling him to clothe, feed, and educate his children. But, as I have said, the *rust of habit* was upon him. The mould of the Departments grown over him.

"I could not but moralize upon the dread scene; and instinctively my mind went back to the gay contrast upon the lighted Avenue. I saw again the crowds of people hurrying past, their arms laden down with presents. I saw them reach home. I saw the cheery glow of the warm fire, heard the joyous shout of their little ones as they ran forward to meet them. Then my mind came back to the dread scene before me. Had this man worked all his lifetime, faithfully worked for his Government for *this*? It was sad, very sad!

"A sign from the dying man, however, interrupted my reflections.

"'It is nearly over,' he whispered faintly. 'It is nearly over! Deserted by my child, my most beloved; with a life harassed by the eternal effort to live, I have no longer anything to stay for. What will become of my poor children? If it were not for that dread question I could die happy!'

There was a silence of a few minutes.

A slight stir at the door now aroused me. A young girl had entered unperceived, her hollow eyes glaring wildly. Pushing by me, she rapidly neared the bed of the dying man.

"He is dying. You must not approach," I whispered in her ear, thinking that she was some idler who had been attracted to the bedside of the dying man through curiosity.

"You must not approach," I continued, interposing my arm as a barrier to her progress.

"Stay me not," she cried wildly, "I am his daughter!" Then throwing herself by the side of the dying man, she sobbed, "Father! Father! I have come to explain all. I am not guilty—so help me Heaven I am not guilty!"

At the sound the wretched father feebly raised his head.

"When," continued the girl, "you cast me off I knew not what you meant—"

"But the money?" interrupted the dying man, covering his eyes with his thin, transparent hands—

"The money?"

"A kind lady lent me the money," replied the girl. "With it I hired a sewing machine. Then I worked, oh how I worked, so that I could get money for your comfort."

"And you are still worthy of my love?" demanded the poor man, eagerly.

"So help me Heaven!"

With a wild startling cry, the poor man now threw his arms about his daughter.

"Heaven be thanked!" he cried fervently. "Heaven be thanked, I can now die in peace."

Then a change came over his features. A bloody froth was upon his lips, a low moan burst forth from his crimsoned lips. "I had forgot," he moaned. "My children, what, oh what will become of them?"

The thought was overpowering. It was his last one. His eyes became set and glassy. His head sunk back. The poor Government clerk was dead.

Tearless the poor children gathered about the low couch. What could they know of death? Naught but the wild sobs of the elder girl broke the deep silence, as one after the other the poor little ones kissed all that now remained of their wretched father. Then taking them by their little hands, and leading their sister tenderly away, we left the miserable room which had been his last home on earth.

"'And he has worked for this?' I murmured sadly and despondingly. 'Yet there are men who begrudge him this!'

"Suddenly a low sound interrupted my thoughts—a low sound suddenly burst upon my ear. Then rising louder and louder, at last rung forth a joyous peal upon the midnight air. It was the signal of the birth of that holy anniversary which should bring JOY AND GOODWILL to all mankind. Christmas eve was over with its many contrasts—the advent of justice and holiness had come.

"The good man had gone home with his presents. The little ones, carefully tucked away in their little cribs, had dreamed their dreams of coming joys. The poor clerk had died—with no hope for the future—and receiving the first luxury he had known for many years from the hands of charity.

“ For many years he had served his Government faithfully—his last words were, ‘ What, oh what will become of my poor children ?’ ”

Think of it, ye honorable members of Congress who have little ones at home. Think of it, you who have grown-up daughters. You who know full well the miseries and enticements of our capital, *act* upon it. Remember it when gathered about your snug Christmas fires, and let the poor government clerk have enough at least to save his children, and their honor.

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